The Long View
Leadership at a Critical Juncture for "African Art" in America

Susan Mullin Vogel

With the perspective reached after fifty years (yes!) working with museum collections of art from Africa, I see a critical juncture now for "African art"—the famed historic sculpture tradition that forms the canonical core—both as an idea and as material objects present in the American art world. In museums especially, "African art" is now being fundamentally redefined by people outside the field while at the same time it is fading from view. The situation in academia is quite different, but in American museums, activity peaked around 1990, then gradually declined during the 2000s, before rapidly losing steam in recent years, even though contemporary African artists are now a regular part of the international art world. Africa's historic art enjoyed almost fifty years of admiring press coverage, special exhibitions, permanent installations, auctions, acquisitions, and a steady stream of substantial publications. After this long run in the spotlight, it is probably now due to take its turn in the background. Even so, where it will land and how it is viewed will be shaped by expert African-art history scholarship.

Both responding to and accelerating its disappearance, eleven[1] leading American art museums that lost specialized, full-time curators of historic African art (my focus here), are not searching for a full-time replacement. Five[2] other influential American art museums with major collections have moved forward and recently appointed new African-art curators (one director).[3] Importantly, these new custodians are experienced dealing with contemporary African art and artists but not with canonical African art objects like those now in their care. Thus a total of sixteen leading American art museums, whose curators contributed to public understanding and expert knowledge, may now use occasional consultants but have no specialized African-art scholar on staff. With apologies to the curators and museum directors concerned, I am presenting these recent appointments as a chapter within the long history of African art in American art museums, and I will be focusing on their shared rather than their individual attributes. I keenly appreciate how uncomfortable it is to be seen from the long view as an enlightening part of a pattern, but without diminishing the singularity of each individual, unavoidably, we are all swimming in the tide of history.

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African art in the United States has always been entangled with this country's intense, conflicted politics of race. (The present discussion is limited to museums in the United States.) As in the 1960s and '70s, the issue of race is again the dominant force shaping the discipline. The civil rights movement and liberal social consciousness of that earlier period led museums and universities to train and hire African-art curators and professors as part of a broad drive to change minds, demolish the notion that African art was "Primitive," and assert its place among the great art traditions in world history. During this period, museum staffs were becoming professionalized, and by the end of that decade, virtually all the newly minted African-art curators held doctorates in the field. They were mostly White Americans.[4]

The five art museum directors and trustees who recently made curatorial appointments are responsive to the messages of Black Lives Matter and Decolonize Our Museums/ Decolonize This Place and are making a laudable effort to balance the racial makeup of their staffs. Some of the eleven museums without curators conducted searches without finding satisfactory candidates and only then terminated their longstanding positions. The five successful searches passed over conventional candidates who satisfied their posted qualifications for advanced degrees, expertise, and experience. Instead, they chose candidates who were short on those credentials but offered other skills, especially in communication,[5] and a familiarity with contemporary African art and culture: four were born in Africa and one is African American. Thus, with good intentions and some failed searches, and not attentive to the overall position of African art in American museums, the directors and trustees of all sixteen museums have left themselves, their collections, and their audiences without a scholar of canonical African art just as specialized knowledge is urgently needed to reframe African art for the future.

The present turn can be seen as the third reframing of African art in about a century. By 1920, small numbers of critics and scholars, led by Europeans, were trying to understand and redefine African artifacts as fine art, largely through analyses of collections made by ethnographers. By the mid twentieth century they had laid a foundation for the second repositioning, using the tools of art history to study "Primitive art" (the art of Africa, Oceania, and the Ancient and Native Americas lumped together in its last gasp as a field). Starting in the 1960s, a small but growing number of art history departments in American universities sent forth a swelling number of PhD students to conduct field research. The "fieldwork generation" developed a new art history grounded in observation of artworks *in situ* and the researchers' personal relationships with art makers and users. The new field attracted a large cohort of young art historians, populating the growing profession of African-art curator and shaping a new field. Today, most curators of the fieldwork generation are retired. The art they saw in Africa and described in the present tense is now historical, and most of the supporting practices, powers, and beliefs have passed into history along with the aging museum objects themselves.

There was a reciprocal dynamic between the hyperactive art market, at its peak in the 1970s and '80s, and the exceptional number of museum exhibitions, acquisitions, and publications. In the period from the mid-1950s through the late 1980s, an almost unimaginable number—hundreds of thousands of African artworks of all kinds, from iconic sculptures to battered fragments, crafts, and copies—left the continent, with the majority ending up in the United States.[6] The rush of exciting new forms and styles arriving on the market inspired hundreds of ordinary people to form large collections, some distinguished, some modest, and gave exceptional vitality to African art scholarship and museum activity. As the market shrank, there were fewer donors and lenders of great artworks to temporary shows, fewer and smaller audiences for books and exhibitions, and a dwindling circle of supporters. Today the market has become smaller, more exclusive, and exponentially more expensive. The era of building major African sculpture collections is closing. It is likely that American art museums have already accessioned at least three quarters of all the canonical African art objects that they will ever own. Ambitious temporary exhibitions of historic sculpture have also become rare, circumscribed by the high costs of insurance and transportation, by reluctant lenders, concerns about repatriation, and

inhibited by the public's association of these objects with oppression and looting. Despite an ambitious new permanent installation upcoming at the Metropolitan and a stupendous current traveling exhibition from the Art Institute,[7] it feels as if the tide is running out for historic African art. Declining in the public eye, it is no longer novel, but it isn't really familiar either. It's your grandfather's art, not old enough to be interesting, but not new enough to be fresh.

Students, audiences, the general public, and even this writer are hugely attracted to art of the present and are less interested than ever before in historic art of any kind. Contemporary African art, as exciting as any, is eclipsing "African art" in the public imagination and in the marketplace. Integrating contemporary art into the historic collections is more or less explicitly mentioned in the press releases announcing the new curatorial appointments, all of whom arrive with experience in that domain. Art newly made by African artists is more exciting, accessible, and appealing than the old masks and figures.[8] However, a curatorial structure that plants living African artists in a department identified with a large historic collection rooted in the notion of "Primitive art" is gravely problematic because it categorizes the artists first as Black and then as contemporary. Fifteen years ago that structure might have been expedient, but no longer: contemporary African art has rapidly developed worldwide as a discipline with many practitioners, including generalists fluent with global contemporary art; African artists have made their way deep into the international world of biennales and art fairs. Major museums—the Tate and MOMA are two—already have full-time African art specialists on their curatorial teams, while numerous unspecialized contemporary art curators routinely integrate African artists into their collections and exhibitions (where most African artists prefer to be shown). Including a few contemporary artworks in installations of historic collections is commonly seen as a means to animate the older pieces, but juxtaposing these two very different kinds of art is even more challenging than exhibiting either type alone. Success demands extra skill and knowledge of both kinds of art, without which the pairings risk becoming shallow, forced, or visually dissonant.

Meanwhile, historic African art is being redefined in three ways: as inert "museum art"; as material for repatriation to Africa; and by an exciting new global art history that links it to distant streams of world art. Each of these redefinitions requires curatorial expertise in the canon of African art.

Alongside Chinese, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and other source traditions in art history, African art is becoming "museum art," rare and valuable objects that exist mainly in museums. The process is already underway organically in some of the museums that are maintaining a display of African art without a specialized curator. There, absent animating scholarship and no longer enlivened by acquisitions or exhibitions, African art appears to be art of an ancient dead culture, revered but now vanished. This is a fallacy, of course. As many as half of the greatest canonical west African artworks are still barely a hundred years old; some are decades younger.

The repositioning of African art primarily as objects for repatriation is also well underway. One would like to hear that debate led by museum curators with an intimate knowledge of the objects and museums. Instead, it has often been steered by advocates who can simplistically portray the issue as morally clear and logistically easy. For any custodian of a historic collection whose personal projects do not need historic objects or who is not well versed in their intricate histories, returning objects to Africa in bulk can look like a virtuous solution to several problems.

But thoughtful repatriation is hugely complicated, requiring detailed understanding of hundreds of different, fluid local situations. The three well-known, nineteenth century military aggressions and looting in the kingdoms of Benin (Nigeria), Abomey (Benin Republic), and Asante (Ghana), though they are complex, are unique cases that will prove to be the easy ones. Those three clusters of objects are unique in their dramatic size, in the clarity of their documentation, and in their unquestioned status as booty of war. Other object histories are far more obscure and challenging to sort out. Experienced provenance researchers on museum staffs work on repatriation for NAGPRA; for Greek, Roman, and ancient Near Eastern antiquities; and for art from Cambodia and Nepal. Obviously, Africanist experts of the same caliber should be on staff to research and interpret the complex histories involved before any decision is taken to repatriate an African object. Roughly half of the African artworks in American and European collections were purchased in Africa by hundreds of African and some Western dealers, passing through thousands upon thousands of small individual transactions without documentation in the twenty or so years starting around Independence.[9] Tracing those pieces back to their origins is a steep challenge, requiring detailed research on distant rules of ownership, long-past events, individual decisions, and much more.[10] The repatriation discourse tends to highlight theft and forced sales in times of distress and to downplay countless everyday transactions motivated by ordinary human desires for what is new, or by the powerful force of religious conversion. Insufficient attention has been paid to the agency and ingenuity of individual African men and women who made decisions to sell, trade, hide, switch, or duplicate their old artworks to serve their own interests, during and after colonial administrations.[11]

One final reframing of African art is especially promising. In the past decade or so, the discipline of art history itself has turned to a more inclusive, porous, and global approach, focusing upon exchanges of forms and ideas across borders and to the far horizons. Africa has a singular role to play in this new art history, linked as it is by geography and history to Europe, the Mediterranean, Arabia, India, and the Americas. This exciting approach breathes new life into our understanding of Africa's past as a participant on equal footing in far-flung cultural exchanges with centers of world power. Three exhibitions that explore such distant connections are emblematic of things to come, notably *Caravans of Gold, Fragments in Time: Art, Culture, and Exchange Across Medieval Saharan Africa* and *The African Origin of Civilization*, cunningly inserted into the Metropolitan's Egyptian galleries, as well as forthcoming exhibitions at the Met and the Walters Museum that will connect African art with Byzantine art.[12] Many other kinds of subtle, specific, and surprising connections can be made with medieval European and other art traditions. But—Africa's prominence in this new art history depends on its scholars' and custodians' ability to join the dialogue among academic and museum researchers in other fields. To discern complicated, esoteric connections between African works and objects from other cultures, the African-art curators need a fine-grained knowledge of the pieces in their own collections.

What happens next? Eleven museums have apparently decided that historic Africa is a low priority and have either discontinued all exhibiting and collecting or have permanently installed highlights from their collections that will stand visible but dormant long term. Five museums filled their Africanist positions, demonstrating a commitment to Africa but not to their historic collections. Their press statements assert that new custodians will be reinterpreting and otherwise taking charge of the historic objects as if there were a seamless continuity between their backgrounds and the traditional qualifications of scholarship, experience, and connoisseurship typical of their Africanist predecessors and their peers in other curatorial departments.

Do not mistake this as a defense of a legacy. It is instead a call to move forward without lapsing into the mistakes of the past when museums could treat African art differently from all other kinds of art. Let us not return to the time when it could be presented with scant reference to the complex aesthetic and religious theories it embodies, or as interesting mainly because of its connection to other

artists—contemporary African artists now, Picasso then. Denying again—just to the African collection—expertise comparable to that found in other curatorial departments is indefensible and not respectful of the heritage it represents.

It is the responsibility of the museum directors and their trustees—the ultimate inheritors and custodians of African art collections whose breadth and quality can never be assembled again—to secure the specialized expertise those collections merit. They have succeeded in bringing in skilled advocates to present the excitement of contemporary African art and culture, to attract new audiences and to address the thorny political issues around repatriation and representation in a new voice. But the museum directors and trustees have failed their obligation to provide the African-art expertise that the donors of these historic objects expected and that the public deserves—knowledge that can animate the collection, and the connoisseurship that will keep forgeries, compromised pieces, and mistakes out of their galleries. Anything less cheats stakeholders and the public of the knowledge they expect to find in a museum and deprives the people of Africa and of African descent of a full and appropriate presentation of the depth of their artistic heritage and the beauty of their ideas.

Notes

1 As of this writing, the Menil Collection, Houston; the Nelson-Atkins Museum, Kansas City; the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Newfields (formerly Indianapolis Museum of Art); Denver Art Museum; Cantor Center for Visual Arts, Stanford University; New Orleans Museum of Art; the Hood Museum, Dartmouth; the Harn Museum, University of Florida, Gainesville; the Minneapolis Institute of Art; and the Birmingham Museum of Art.

2 The High Museum, Atlanta (2020); the Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco (2020); National Museum of African Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC (n.d.); the Newark Museum of Art (2022); the Brooklyn Museum (2022). In contrast, an experienced scholar and curator of historic African art—including its twenty-first century expressions—who is White was recently appointed director of the Fowler Museum at UCLA.

3 The recently hired director of NMAfA is included among the five, though the structure and nomenclature of that position is different from the others. NMAfA is not a freestanding museum with an autonomous board of trustees, but its director reports to the secretary of the Smithsonian Institution and its Board of Regents. The discussion that follows includes the Smithsonian secretary and regents among the "directors and trustees." NMAfA's chief curator retired and has not been replaced and the staff has been restructured with those functions folded into new positions, notably that of Head of Knowledge Production. Only two persons on the staff have titles that include "curator," so I am assuming the director of this specialized art museum must also broadly take on some curatorial functions.

4 A consequence of academic art history programs' longstanding failure to recruit and train non-White students. Art historians' traditional low pay is also a disincentive.

5 Outreach to communities has increasingly been part of the job description for African-art curator without much acknowledgement that this work is demanding, time-consuming, and rarely required of curators in other departments.

6 This is based on in-depth interviews I conducted with seventeen African, European, and American art dealers who participated in the hand-to-hand trade that passed artworks from African villages to the international art market from the 1950s to the 1980s. Interviews are for my forthcoming history of African art in the American art world and its links to events in Africa and Europe from the 1960s to the 1990s.

7 Opened at the Kimbell Art Museum in Fort Worth, *The Language of Beauty in African Art* is slated to run November 20, 2022 through February 27, 2023 at the Art Institute of Chicago.

8 I refer here to art that fits into the international contemporary art world, not recent masks or other works that continue historic practices.

9 See note 6.

10 Such detailed research includes: where and which types of objects were likely to have been seized by force, sold by the individuals who owned them, or liable to have been stolen by foreign traders or young family members; where specific object types were typically stored; who had access and rights over given types of objects; and which local political and religious authorities prevailed at the time they were removed.

11 A byproduct of sophistocated provenance research can sometimes almost miraculously bring an object alive again by introducing American audiences to the living descendants of the maker or first owner, and the human stories behind the object's use and meaning. The exhibition *One: Egúngún* is a perfect example. Curated by Kristen Windmuller-Luna, it ran from February 8–August 18, 2019 at the Brooklyn Museum.

12 *Caravans* was organized by Kathleen Bickford Berzock at the Block Museum, Northwestern University, 2019; *Origins* was organized by Alisa Lagamma, curator of the African collection and Diana Craig Patch, curator of the Egyptian collection, 2022.

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dialogue

"Knowledge" or "Progress?" Do They Have to Be Mutually Exclusive?

Amanda H. Hellman

I appreciate Susan Vogel's essay on "The Long View," and she highlights many important concerns and frustrations about the state of the field. She takes issue with the American museum's shift in priorities from historical African art—which makes up the majority of collections from the African continent—to contemporary, made most visible by the hiring of contemporary specialists for historical collections or leaving them without curators altogether. I agree that there needs to be a rich grounding in the nuanced visual vernacular that is, perhaps, the most diverse field of art. But what is that exactly? I have closely studied, poured over the literature, exposed myself to visual material in the field, at auction, and in museum, gallery, and private collections all over the world, and yet, I regularly come across works that I cannot quite place, that I have never seen before, that I cannot confidently say whether they are "real" or "fake." A curator fully trained in historical African art will still never have the expertise of someone who has fifty years of deep and focused experience until they too have worked in the field for that long.

What this industry change demonstrates is a commitment to a new way of thinking, and with this comes a struggle as we figure out how to find our way through uncharted territory without losing sight of the path that got us here. You cannot gather all the knowledge and understand everything to solve every problem. What you can do is

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